

Wrestling Perspective

• Analysis and Commentary From The McLaughlin Group of Professional Wrestling •

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The WWF Serving Hard Time?

By - Paul J. MacArthur

The story of the WWF's ascent from a Northeastern regional promotion to a successful national corporation has been well documented. The use of Pay-Per-View, the MTV rock and wrestling connection, quality talent, celebrities and other assorted marketing techniques, at a time when few promoters were trying anything new, proved to be key ingredients in a winning formula. However times are changing, and recently, the WWF has suffered a severe decline in house show attendance, which has forced them to cancel "C" shows and release several wrestlers. Also, The Ultimate Warrior has not drawn well, Hulk Hogan doesn't appear to be returning to full-time status soon, if at all, and it appears hard times may be facing the WWF. Further complicating matters is that there appears to be no immediate solution.

During the early years of the WWF's national push, established talents like Hogan, Paul Orndorff, Barry Windham, Mike Rotunda, Jake Roberts, the British Bulldogs, Ricky Steamboat and Randy Savage were brought in to set the promotion on fire. In essence, Vince McMahon cherry-picked the top talent from several regional promotions. With several regional promotions to choose from, he had what appeared to be an endless supply of talent at his disposal. The problem is he then penetrated the same areas he drew the talent from and took the crowds away. The effect was detrimental to most regional offices. Small time and even successful promoters, who once had regional monopolies, were now forced to be part of an extremely competitive oligopoly or fade from the scene. Many closed their doors, a few were crippled, fewer remained successful and none maintained their previous level of success. What McMahon should have realized was that driving competitors out of business would deplete the available talent pool and thus eliminate one of the key ingredients in his successful formula: fresh quality talent. Titan is now faced with a problem it created in the early 80's that should have been foreseen: Where will new talent come from?

As a partial solution, Titan has brought in Sgt. Slaughter, the Road Warriors and Kerry Von Erich with the hopes that they will be capable of recapturing some of their past glories. But, these wrestlers are past their primes. Though Von Erich receives a decent reaction live, he is not a long-term answer to the WWF's problems. If the current course of action is to rely on wrestlers, who, though not exhausted in the WWF, are still past their glory days, it will hardly be a successful substitution for fresh quality talent.

The talent shortage problem, however, may be overstated. There is one potential solution that depends on the NWA's ineptitude, and is therefore a likely one. The NWA presently wants to abolish guaranteed contracts for mid-level and preliminary wrestlers. While they will still have contracts for Ric Flair, Sting and Lex Luger, a number of wrestlers will become free agents over the next six to eight months. The NWA has been unable, or more likely, unwilling to use the Midnight Express, the Steiner Brothers, Tom Zenk and Brian Pillman properly. Come contract renewal time, it would not be surprising to see the WWF

take some, if not all, of these wrestlers. While McMahon may not effectively use all of these wrestlers, he certainly would be able to use the Express and the Steiners with a greater degree of success than the NWA. If fact, who would doubt McMahon could continue his winning ways with an influx of such talent? Basically, if the NWA eliminates guaranteed mid-level and preliminary contracts, they will be used as a training ground/farm system for the WWF. The WWF's talent shortage would be alleviated as they could cherry-pick the NWA whenever they needed new talent. Combine this with an occasional star taken from a regional promotion, and the talent problem may not be as severe as it appears. Then again, few organizations waste quality talent like the WWF.

Some have suggested most of the WWF talent is stale. Yet, is there any reason why Savage, Tito Santana, Ted DiBiase, Roberts, Bret Hart and Rick Martel should be stale? These men are all solid performers who have found themselves in poorly contrived feuds and are often held back from putting on a top-notch performance. As someone once so eloquently said "Is there any reason why a DiBiase/Roberts match should suck?" Obviously not. But, for some reason, the WWF has held back their talented performers, put them in unexciting feuds and, often, jobbed them out of any credibility. In the process, less talented, less charismatic and less appealing wrestlers are receiving pushes over these talented men. While it may be argued the value of Martel, DiBiase, Santana and Roberts is no longer that of main event status, these men with creative booking, properly executed turns and explosive matches could regenerate interest in many of the WWF's matches. The older talent combined with still fresh talent like the Rockers, Curt Hennig, Paul Roma and the Big Boss Man could be anything but stale if the WWF used some creativity and pushed them for long-term runs as opposed to one-shot runs with Hogan or The Ultimate Warrior.

While there is certainly top-notch talent in the WWF, the creative energy is not present. Some have argued that over the past five years, the WWF has virtually shown us everything on a national level. There is some merit to this argument. Over the past five years we have seen some outrageous angles, circus gimmicks and, some great matches. But, now it seems angles are often just recycled with different personalities. The Hogan/Earthquake angle was a rehash of the Wrestlemania II King Kong Bundy angle. How many times has the Honky Tonk Man started a feud by hitting someone with his guitar? While recycling is environmentally responsible, for a national promotion, it is a certain sign of trouble.

As far as the "we've seen it all" argument is concerned, it simply doesn't hold a lot of water. There are always new people with creative ideas. The current booking series by Jeff Bowdren in the Observer proves this point. Eddie Gilbert's recent angles in Memphis and the Chris Adams' wives feud shows there are a number of different ways to create, develop and execute a feud. Soap operas have had over 30-year runs on television because they have captivated a large, loyal audience. They do so with different twists, new characters, new ideas and even some recycling. In fact, often they are just variations on older themes, but they are still creative. They also bring in new writers when the current staff starts to burn out. All the evidence shows the current booking staff in the WWF is burning out. When the best gimmick they can come up with for Tony Atlas is Saba Simba, particularly after watching his unique heel persona in the ICW, there have to be problems with the WWF's booker. A new face involved with booking matches is a necessity if the WWF has any hopes of bouncing back from this tough period.

Part of the "we've seen it all" perception is due to the industry's overexposure. The WWF has three hours of syndicated programs and three hours on the USA network each week. There are four or five Saturday Night's Main Events, one prime time pre-Wrestlemania special and four PPVs per year. This provides enough, if not too much, television for the average WWF fan. There are also three hours of NWA syndication and three to four hours on WTBS weekly. There are five Clashes and five NWA PPVs each year. While the NWA and the WWF cater to a different audience, there are some crossover fans affected by this television saturation. Add in the few regional promotions and a less than exciting booking regime and the amount of things that seem new or exciting are severely

diminished. The crossover effect is not a major problem, but it needs to be addressed.

To make matters worse, the future of Hogan is questionable. It is becoming obvious that Hogan will not be returning to the promotion on a full-time basis. Yet, the promotion is still centered on him. When a promotion focuses on a man whose future is questionable, it can't be called intelligent business. Many attribute the WWF's house show summer lull to the The Ultimate Warrior's inability to draw, but the problem is the WWF spent the entire summer hyping the Hogan/Earthquake angle and Hogan's return for SummerSlam. In the process, they sacrificed their summer business and their World Champion. It will be very difficult to market the Warrior as the WWF's top wrestler after he's spent his first six months as champion in the second-string position. While some champions may take some time to catch fire, few can get hot without the promotion's support.

Hogan, for all the success he has brought the promotion, is now causing them major problems. He is still the promotion's top star, his future is questionable and the WWF has been unable to decide how to handle the situation. If they are waiting for another Hogan, they will have a long wait in store for them. A wrestler with Hogan's appeal comes around only so often. There are only a few people like Hulk Hogan that can captivate the imagination of so many fans. Eventually, these stars lose their appeal and promotions need to create stars to take their place. In fact, the signs already indicate Hogan's appeal is diminishing. He is no longer selling out arenas with his Dino Bravo matches. While some may blame his opponent, there was a time when Hogan could sell out arenas regardless of his opponent. Today, it will take a charismatic heel to bring Hogan back to the level of success he once achieved. With DiBiase and Savage jobbed out, there aren't many convincing heels with enough charisma to bring in the business that was common from 1985-1988. As Hogan's appeal starts to slowly fade, the WWF must decide if they are going to ride his coat tails to the end or begin the process of creating a new champion and top star. The former is easy, but a poor business decision. The latter is difficult, has no guarantee of success, but is the only long-term solution to the WWF's current dilemma.

Who to promote as the next number one star is a difficult decision. The mistakes the WWF have made with The Ultimate Warrior prevents him from ever rising above the number two position. Within the WWF, there are few people able to take over the top spot. With a proper face turn, Savage could be the top attraction once again; so could DiBiase. They are both talented and charismatic enough to carry the load for the WWF, but they are both approaching 40 so they would only be a three or four year solution. While Hennig is young and talented, he lacks the charisma and interview ability, particularly in the babyface role, to be an effective champion. Beyond Savage and DiBiase, the WWF needs to look outside the promotion and the two logical answers are Luger and Sid Vicious. Luger is ready now, Vicious will be in a couple years. While both are under contract, either could be the WWF's solution for the 90's. As the WWF's situation worsens, it will be interesting to see just how forcefully they pursue these two men.

A final problem is the trend of the business. As Vic Stanley notes later in this issue, the business has moved away from house shows towards PPV, cable and network specials. This trend may cause long-term problems. Successful businesses became that way not because they went in for quick whirlwind profits, but because they were consistent over long periods of time. The practice of going from PPV to PPV while using the house shows as filler is beginning to create problems. It's creating a reliance on four or five big shows per year and if one of them fails, for any reason - and with PPV there is always the chance of transmission failure or a poor buy-rate - it will set the promotion back a great distance. Two failures in one year could have a crippling effect should the WWF depend on PPV as their chief source of revenue. When faced with the option of focusing on four or five phenomenal money makers with a high degree of risk, or 250-300 consistent respectable money makers, the successful businessman will choose the later. For the WWF to remain successful through the 90's, it needs to change the direction of the current trend, even if it helps the competition. The big PPV should still remain part of the sport, but sacrificing the house shows will only prove detrimental to those who choose to do the

sacrificing.

The current problems facing the WWF may be its biggest challenge yet. It's not unusual for an organization to have a very successful run for five or six years. In the WWF's case, becoming successful was the easy part. Now they are beginning to feel some of the side effects their own success created. It is the truly unusual organization that can adapt to changing trends, weather the tough times and remain successful for decades. Now, when it appears times are tough, it's time for the WWF to prove if they are truly remarkable or just a footnote in the history of wrestling.

Racism In Pro Wrestling: A Response

By - Rodney Leighton

This is not intended as an incitement nor as a degradation of Vic Stanley nor his article, but merely as a statement, or perhaps, a rebuttal. The article "Pro Wrestling: The Last Sanctioned Haven for Racism," carried in Issue #6, was well written. However, I did detect a note of stridency throughout. While some excellent points were made, I do have a minor objection and a couple of major ones.

The minor issue is that Ricky Steamboat is portrayed as having been born and raised in Japan. I am not certain, but I believe he was born in America. So what if he has some Japanese ancestry? In the days when the "Japanese" villain was the ultimate in heels, at least half of them had never seen Japan, nor would they ever. It seems to me that if someone uses a person's ancestry as a basis for anything, then they are either racist or elitist.

The first major objection is that Stanley creates the impression that all people of color in wrestling are mistreated, made to work despicable angles and do clean jobs. This doesn't seem correct to me. I thought, perhaps, I just hadn't noticed. To me, a man is a man and a woman a woman, who cares what color their skin is? So, I took a look through the 1989 Wrestling Observer Yearbook. Upon examination of the Yearbook, Rocky King was not listed. But, passing by the Mexicans and Samoans and people really or supposedly from Tonga and Hawaii and such, there are about 38 wrestlers listed whom I know are colored and work in North America. Yes, there are a number of people who fit into Stanley's description, but so do a number of white people as well. There are also: Abdullah the Butcher (how many jobs has anyone ever seen Abby do?), Badnews Brown (once a decent wrestler, now worse than lousy, but when was the last time anyone saw Brown do a job?), Doom and the Junkyard Dog. Granted, that is not many, about 12% or so. Are 12% of the active white wrestlers in the position those five are? Do 12% of active white wrestlers receive the treatment these five do?

Second is this: Stanley makes the statement that wrestling should strive to be perceived as a "real sport" and the best man should win. This is an admirable objective and one I would love to see. But if one ignored color and politics, does anyone believe Ron Simmons and Butch Reed would hold the NWA World Tag Titles? Of course not. In his article, Stanley made use of the Ric Flair/JYD, King scenario. While granting the angle was in poor taste and somewhat deplorable, I wonder about Stanley's reasoning here. Under the situation of giving the impression that the best man won, does he, or anyone, really believe the Junkyard Dog would ever work a match, much less gain a clean pinfall victory over Flair? Is it not almost as offensive as the racist comments made by certain people that a man with the ability and work-rate of a JYD should gain a victory over a man the quality of Flair? Is it not true that in such a scenario, regardless of color, Flair would defeat JYD, King and

Thunderbolt Patterson, all at once, with no trouble?

There is another aspect to this. Is it not true that, in many cases, colored wrestlers are working because of their color? Doom is proof of my argument and the antithesis of it. I seriously doubt they are champions not so much due to their color as other things. I believe that Doom, no matter if they were white, yellow or polka dotted, using the style, mannerisms, attitudes and tactics they do, would be hated heels. They might even be champions, maybe. I readily admit, a situation where a push is based on race is deplorable. On the other hand, would it have been possible to run the Flair/JYD angle using a white person of little ability, much less no ability? Of course not. It is a sickening situation; on the other hand, JYD, King, Brown, Sapphire and a bunch more are making money, eating and have the adulation of a segment of the population. Does any man, woman or group have the right to deny these people these things because of personal feelings?

Wrestling - Still The Workingman's Sport?

By - Vic Stanley

This is Part II of Vic Stanley's three part series on racism, classism and sexism in professional wrestling. Part III, sexism, will appear in Issue #10.

Is Dusty Rhodes the common man of wrestling? He says that he is, but I honestly don't know. I do know that Virgil Riley Runnels is not. In actuality, Runnels is a former business management executive now wrestling in polka dot tights. Throughout his career, Rhodes has mastered the art of self promotion, often to the detriment of his peers and the sport in general. Now he is a mass media created common man; a product of both his and Vince McMahon's vivid imaginations. This is akin to Sylvester Stallone being promoted as an actual war hero. Do the fans really want to emulate Rhodes? What does the common man really mean to the wrestling industry these days?

Pro wrestling used to be the sport of the working class. Today, as with most other forms of live entertainment, the major promotions, especially the WWF, no longer rely on the blue collar fan as their primary source of income. Naturally the business wants and needs the participation of every demographic group, but the balance is now tipped in an upscale direction. The actual wrestling is merely a peripheral to the merchandising of foam rubber toys, action dolls, ice cream bars, and magazines. For this to happen, the marketing must be targeted at people with young children and lots of money.

In the wrestling glory days of the '50s through the early '70s, every house show was greeted with the anticipation and enthusiasm of a Wrestlemania or a Bash. Madison Square Garden and the Chicago Amphitheater shows were social gatherings as well as sporting events. Friendships and romances were formed at these shows because fans attended on a regular basis, much like dance halls or drive ins. This was a loyal hardcore following that didn't necessarily believe wrestling, but they believed in wrestling and in the spirit of community that it nurtured. Perhaps, in a sense, wrestling actually was more real then, because it was such an important part of every day life.

Nowadays the house and television shows exist only to hype the high priced pay-per-views by presenting endless angles that are not resolved for less than \$20 to \$50 in some cases. Add the \$25 sweatshirts, the \$3 hotdogs and \$5 parking and it is immediately out of reach for a large segment of the potential audience. Those who can afford admission to these

shows are in a completely different demographic group from the fans of old. They are the easily distracted, disposable income bunch. There is now such a variety of entertainment sources that today's relatively affluent patrons attend whatever is the flashiest and trendiest attraction on any given date. Once a year, these upscale fans flock to Wrestlemania because it is the "in" media event, but they are not true wrestling fans. Next week they will attend a Madonna concert or a Monster Truck Exhibition rather than the local wrestling show. This situation is similar to the World Series or the Superbowl. Those in attendance at these elite events are not the loyal fans who steadfastly suffered through previous losing seasons with their teams.

Technology, mass marketing and an ever changing fan base have taken the human element out of wrestling. The business no longer rewards long-term fan loyalty. The fans are now as expendable as the performers. They take the quick, easy buck and immediately reinvest it into the next PPV extravaganza.

There is no longer a sense of continuity in the house shows. Anybody who follows the bulletins can see the results of endless identical matches with identical finishes. The only difference is the city, and even the variety of venues is rapidly narrowing since the quality of house shows worsen on daily basis. Fewer fans will pay to see watered-down cards with no title changes or even title matches. Promotions with enough talent for only one decent show per night are scheduling two heavily padded shows simultaneously. Add to this the inevitable no-shows and the outcome is usually a big let down for the loyal fans.

The WWF counts on complete fan turnover every two to three years. As the kids reach puberty, many lose interest in wrestling, and the audience gets increasingly younger. This is why a wrestler's history, even within the WWF itself is rarely mentioned past the current angles. Thus the new fans aren't aware that Rick Martel was a three-time WWF Tag Team Champion, or even that Akeem was once the One Man Gang. This lost sense of history has done much to change the face of the business. Where there was once a Rembrandt, there is now an Andy Warhol soup can.

This history of the sport is very important to the long-time fans. That is a major difference between the past and present. Mentions of Bruno Sammartino or Bob Backlund championship matches bring back fond memories to the older fans. But these recollections conflict with the present WWF marketing techniques, so very few references to their past history are ever mentioned. Sammartino was "immortal" long before Hulk Hogan came on the scene, but kids today have no idea who he is. It is a shame that the WWF has taken this attitude, because they really do have an illustrious past. Today's fans will forget about the Ultimate Warrior the moment he disappears because that is the nature of the sport. How many fans remember that a little over a year ago, Tully Blanchard and Arn Anderson held the WWF Tag Team Titles?

The NWA retains more of a sense of past history, but this is more out of necessity than anything else. Other than the little girls screaming for Flyin' Brian and Sting, most NWA fans have been loyal and knowledgeable for quite a while. When a wrestler disappears, then returns under a mask, hardly anyone is fooled. Another reason is, due to the relatively limited talent base, the NWA must somehow justify bringing back old-timers like Harley Race, Junkyard Dog and Thunderbolt Patterson. The easiest way to accomplish this is by showcasing their illustrious pasts.

Another aspect of this metamorphosis is the manner in which the wrestlers are now portrayed. In my youth, Reggie "Crusher" Lisowski and Dick the Bruiser were the true people's champions. They spoke and lived like the common man, and we knew that it was not a put-on since they were so much more accessible to the fans than the wrestlers are today. Since the sport was much more regional, the performers could mingle with the fans more often and get to know them as friends.

Eventually, as the promotional territories expanded, the image of the hero had to change to

accommodate a more generic fan base. Thus we are now inundated with Hulk Hogan and Warrior clones, each one more muscle-bound than the previous one. There are fewer heroes like Pedro Morales or Sammartino who appealed to specific urban areas. As steroids take their physical toll, the wrestlers will have to become even more interchangeable to retain some sense of continuity within the industry. The Ultimate Warrior's rap is often incoherent, but as long as his veins and muscles are bulging for the camera, it really doesn't matter. In most cases, we are better off not knowing what he is saying anyway.

Many changes in wrestling were made out of necessity, but others were made solely out of greed. In order for McMahon to revolutionize the industry, he had to forsake much that was sacred to his loyal and long-time fans. His strategies have been positive in a marketing sense, but the overall effect is the same as the generic aisle in the supermarket. The only difference is that in the store, the generic food is cheaper than the name brands.

If you're interested in reading more articles by Vic Stanley, he's had a couple published in Wrestling Then & Now, available from Evan Ginzburg at PO Box 471, Oakland Gardens Station, Flushing, NY 11364 for \$1.25 per issue.

Barry Windham: At The Crossroads of His Career

By - David Skolnick

Barry Windham returned to the NWA earlier this year in outstanding fashion. He played a key role in a hot angle that saw the Horsemen attack Sting and Lex Luger prior to Luger's title shot at Capital Combat '90. The signing of Windham was seen as a key acquisition for the NWA which, at the time, was in the midst of a talent shortage. It was also a good opportunity for Windham, who had been out of the spotlight for some time. Unfortunately, since the initial angle, Windham has not displayed much of his talents and may be on the verge of quitting the promotion for a second time.

Windham is one of the five best wrestlers in the country - heel or face - when he wants to be. Even when not up to performing, he still works better than 90 percent of all active wrestlers. It's not his skills that have come into question during the past year and a half, but his desire to excel. Maybe Windham no longer wants to wrestle. Perhaps his injury is bothering him more than most people realize and he just wants to be left alone. With his father, Blackjack Mulligan, and his brother, Kendall Windham, both in prison convicted on counterfeiting charges, it's rather simple for Windham to have other things besides his career on his mind. In defense of Windham's recent actions, the NWA has done next to nothing to showcase his extraordinary talents and that could easily cause his work-rate to suffer. However, the NWA is paying him a six-figure salary, and as long as Windham is collecting this type of money, it is his responsibility to perform for the company. Whatever the reason, Windham must reevaluate his career and his future. If he does indeed leave the NWA, he may as well leave the country if he wishes to continue making his living as a wrestler. In the past two years, he has walked away from the NWA and the WWF. If he quits the NWA again, the two major U.S. promotions will not take another chance on him no matter how good he is. The only options left would be Japan or smaller U.S. promotions. Considering that the smaller promotions could never pay him the salary he deserves, nor what he's received in the past, the logical option is Japan.

Since Windham's return to the NWA, he has been the invisible Horseman. He is hardly ever on television in a match or being interviewed. It is amazing that a wrestler as talented

as Windham can go virtually ignored by the promotion. The NWA should be doing more with him. Perhaps they were planning to give him the tag title or involve him in a major program, but they never gave any indication to that effect. At the time of his injury, Windham was filling in for an "injured" Sid Vicious.

Many question Windham's desire during the past two years. "Does he want to wrestle?" is a question that goes through many fans' minds. In the situation he has found himself in since his return, the answer would probably be "no." After all, why should he be tied down in meaningless tag matches, do an occasional run in or win a squash?

Windham is a favorite of many fans. Not only is he an excellent wrestler, but he has excellent ring psychology and presence, gives a good, sometimes great, interview and has that certain intangible that makes him one of the best in the business. Since his rookie days in Memphis and Florida, he has wrestled like a seasoned pro. Some of the greatest memories I have of wrestling involved Windham including: the Dirty Yellow Dog stint, the saddle match against Ron Bass, dozens of classic bouts against Ric Flair and the heel turn on Luger. Who can ever forget the evil smirk on his face after he removed the Midnight Rider's mask the night he joined the Four Horsemen?

This current situation is a *deja vu* for fans: Windham suffers an injury and then disappears from the promotion. Windham is going through a lot right now and the NWA needs to be patient with him. To the NWA's credit, they are not forcing him to make a return before he is ready. However, Windham must make some important decisions immediately; if he wasn't so talented, he would already be out on the streets. Windham has the talent. Does he have the desire?

Sidelines

Thanks To Steve Beverly, Evan Ginzburg, Mike Gunderloy, Ron Lemieux, Jeff Mullins and Wrestling Eye for their plugs. We sincerely appreciate their help.

TU Rasslin' Riot is the latest publication from Brian Tramel. It features great uncensored humor, stories and even some commentary about wrestling. The October issue contributions by Jeff Zinger, Rodney Leighton, Dave Meltzer, Jeff Bowdren and entertaining random rap with Brian. Overall, a fun sheet to read. Available from Brian Tramel, 1806 Self Circle Rd, Apt B, Jonesboro, AR 72401 at a cost of \$3.00 for four issues. Be forewarned, this is a bulletin for mature readers who are not easily offended.

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